

Folklore Fellows Summer School 2021

The Violence of Traditions and the Traditions of Violence

Jesse Barber
University of Helsinki

Despite the situation presented by the pandemic, the Folklore Fellows' Summer School turned out to be a very productive, engaging, and personable experience. Although everyone was sitting in front of a screen, instead of sitting together in a lecture hall in Joensuu, the event went very smoothly with riveting discussion from many esteemed scholars and up-and-coming doctoral students. There were very few technological hiccups, and the FFSS's directors did a very fine job of coordinating the schedule. The theme of violence proved to be an incredibly diverse topic. Lectures presented diverse subject matter from violent local ball games to horrific acts of genocide. This versatile topic fit very well within the already very diverse discipline of folklore, which encompasses everything from traditions in antiquity to current events. A prominent point of discussion, which arose within the theme of violence, was the parameters of victimhood. The victims discussed in the presentations also displayed a wide range of diversity, from non-human animals to persecuted minority cultures. All of these subjects led to a very in-depth and comprehensive analysis of the broad framework of violence in folklore.

During the weeks leading up to the official start of the summer school, there was a voluntary reading group composed of students and co-leaders who had been invited to coordinate each group and discussion, who all met online and discussed the required readings for the summer school. This reading group not only prepared the students for the presentations of the keynote speakers, but also gave them an opportunity to meet one another and begin discussion of the themes and topics of the summer school. The summer school itself was divided into two parts, spanning two weeks. The first week was composed of ten keynote lectures, two each day for five days. The lectures were each an hour long, which could be viewed by anyone, followed by an hour of discussion, which was only accessible by the summer school participants. The second week consisted of separate workshop groups that met for about an hour and a half each day for four days. On the last day of the second week all the participants came together again to give feedback on the workshops and the summer school as a whole. Following this last session was an online party celebrating the success of the summer school.

Week One: The Keynote Speakers

The first week that kicked off the FFSS was devoted to fantastic lectures from revered folklorists. The first presentation was "#Kalevala Too. Heritage, Harassment and the Epic Heroine" presented by Niina Hämäläinen and Lotte Tarkka. Their lecture focused on the Aino episode in *Kalevala* and its implications within the context of the #metoo movement. During this movement in Finland, the character of Väinämöinen – a central hero of the epic, known by the epithet 'the eternal sage', to whom Aino is promised in marriage, who in her turn prefers suicide – was heavily criticized, and some began to refer to him as 'the eternal groper'. Nineteenth-century paintings of the scenes in the Aino episode, featuring an old bearded Väinämöinen stalking and groping after a very young Aino, helped progress this viewpoint of the narrative as nothing but outdated, patriarchal, sexist trash.

However, Hämäläinen and Tarkka pointed out that much of this Aino episode, like many aspects of the *Kalevala* narratives, were invented by Elias Lönnrot. They also explained that *Kalevala* has many temporal and cultural layers. It was derived from folk poetry collected in the past few centuries in both Finland and Karelia. These poems were then artificially connected by Elias Lönnrot through artistic license. They also proposed that reducing Väinämöinen to 'the eternal groper' was not quite accurate, because, like the *Kalevala*, and even more so the folk poetry, Väinämöinen has many faces. The presentation finished with the point that there are many strong female characters in *Kalevala* like Louhi, who rules the North and possesses the Sampo, Lemminkäinen's Mother, who defies death itself to bring her son back to life, and even Aino, who defies the arranged marriage and takes her fate into her own hands. Hämäläinen and Tarkka concluded that these women can be seen as *the* strong characters in *Kalevala*, while the men come off as somewhat pathetic; in many scenes the women laugh and make the men cry.

Charles Briggs gave the second lecture of the first day, discussing "When Violence Moves across Species". His presentation began with the origins of the current COVID-19 epidemic, specifically the narratives surrounding the wet markets in Wuhan, China. Many of these stories revolve around someone eating a bat and becoming patient zero

of the global pandemic. Briggs remarked upon how quickly these anecdotes displayed racist implications and especially assumptions about the hygiene of the people of Wuhan.

Sadhana Naithani began the second day with a lecture that was “Wildly Ours 3.0: Narrative Traditions, Violence and Non-Human Animals”. She focused on the violence that British colonialism brought to India against non-human animals. The massacre of wildlife from 1875 to 1924 led to the deaths of 80,000 tigers, 150,000 leopards, and 200,000 wolves. Naithani focused especially on tigers, the reverence for which in India goes back to the Indus Valley civilization ca. 4500 BC.

“Northern Colonialities and Violences from a Narrative Perspective” was conferred by Stein R. Mathisen, who focused on the Saami people of Norway and the history of their colonization by the Norwegian government. Mathisen discussed the re-education schools for Saami children in recent centuries, which aimed to assimilate them into Norwegian culture and society. This re-education was nothing short of cultural genocide, although nineteenth-century Norwegians viewed the Saami as pupils who needed their neighbors to teach them.

Terry Gunnell discussed the “Violence of the Mask: From Greek Tragedy to the Avatar” on the third day of the FFSS. His presentation examined masks from around the world and their various uses. During the pandemic, masks have been used to protect one’s health and the health of those around them. Gunnell noted that, in the pandemic context, the lack of a mask in a public place could be interpreted as a sort of passive violence. In contrast, other masks denote violence, like the masks worn by the terrorist group Isis. Masks also create a new dynamic in interaction and performance.

Regina Bendix gave a lecture on “The Briefest of Wars and Its Long Aftermath: 1967 through the Prism of Personal Narrative”. Her talk focused on the Six-Day War between Israel and Palestine in 1967. Bendix began the presentation by proposing that a story is both what happened and what is said to have happened. She then went into accounts from people, who were present during the Six-Day War. This approach is very important because it gives a novel folklore approach to a historical event.

Valdimar Hafstein was “Wrestling with Tradition: Masculinity, Modernity, and Heritage in Icelandic Glíma Wrestling” on the fourth day of the summer school. Glíma wrestling is a unique Icelandic form of wrestling with roots that extend back into the ninth century. The sport centers around two wrestlers attempting to lift their opponent by a belt that each competitor wears. The belt is called the “Grettir belt”, named after the Icelandic strongman and eponymous hero of *Grettis saga Ásmundarsonar*.

Neil Martin explained how a local sport can become “More Than a Game: Seasonal Handball in Scotland”. His lecture focused on a ball game that occurs every year

beginning on the first Thursday of Lent in the town Jedburgh, close to the Scottish and English border. Every year, the town splits into two teams; the nature of the game is rough and sometimes results in injuries (although rarely), as well as damages to buildings. This violence has led some people to question whether the game truly promotes brotherhood as was intended, or if it simply promotes aggression.

The first lecture on the last day of the keynote speaker portion of the summer school was presented by Nona Shahnazarian, who discussed “Ethnic Violence and Rescue Stories: Case-Studies from Post-Communist Hate Speech and Armed Conflicts”. Her talk focused on the 1988 pogrom in Sumgait, a town which at the time was part of the Azerbaijan Soviet Socialist Republic. She presented general information on the genocide of Armenians in the city, as well as testimonials of Azerbaijanis, who helped Armenians hide from the angry mobs that targeted them. Although the people in the testimonials were strangers, Shahnazarian argued that the rescues were a result of a strong unspoken relationship, that the rescuers felt obligated to help through a strong sense of neighborliness, despite the lack of a personal relationship.

The concluding lecture, of the first week of the FFSS, was given by Pertti Anttonen. He provided a general overview of “Folklorists and the Violence of Folklore: Questions of Methodology and Activism”. Anttonen opened with a quote from the Swedish sociologist Sanja Magdalenic, which stated that folklorists have neglected to address the dark side of folklore, especially traditions of violence, war, etc. Anttonen gave some examples of legal cases in which cultural background was used as a defense against accusations of violent crimes.

Week Two: The Workshops

During week two of the FFSS, the participants were split into four workshop groups with two professors presiding over each workshop. Each workshop member presented a paper that they are currently working on for fifteen minutes, followed by ten minutes of comments and questions from another participant, who was assigned to comment on their paper and to begin the discussion. The remaining time was then opened up to discussion with the whole class following the comments. I was assigned to the group with Terry Gunnell and Neil Martin leading the conversation on “Violence Performed: The Dark Side of Traditions, Youtube and Everyday Life, from Masking Practices to Shootings and Isis”.

In the weeks leading up to the workshop, each student read through a reading list designed to inform them of performance theory, especially when applied to violent traditions. I had never read very much on performance theory, so it was very interesting to get acquainted with the

methodology and theory that revolves around the field. One striking aspect to me was the breadth of situations and behavior that can be interpreted as performance. From protestors banging pots and pans to act in a disruptive manner in order to draw attention to a political issue to the Crimean Cossack revivalists dressing in traditional Cossack garb to carry on cultural traditions, performance has many functions. However, the definition of performance is not limited to character roles; it is also how well an object executes its function. In this way, one may talk about car performance or computer performance. What I took away from this was that interaction is the essence of performance: performance is the mode and the efficacy of a person or object interacting with the external world. On the first day of the workshop, Gunnell and Martin gave lectures on performance theory followed by a discussion of the whole workshop.

During the remaining three days of the workshop, there were two presentations a day from the students. It was very interesting to see how each participant applied these ideas to their individual research topic. The presentations discussed everything from a televised hostage situation in Greece to masked dance dramas in India. Performance was highlighted in both real and staged situations, in both authentic and artificial violence. The individual interests of

the group members clearly underscored the diversity and versatile use of performance studies. As a result, I thought about my own research in new ways.

The Final Day of the Summer School

The climate of the online workshop was very conducive to discussion and discourse. I felt very lucky to be paired with a wonderful bunch of students and two professors, who helped expand upon the commentary and questions that were analyzed during the course of the workshop. However, I have no doubt the other workshops worked just as well, because on the final day of the conference the summer school met for one more group session. Each workshop group reported how well their week had gone, and there was only very positive feedback from my group and the others. Hopefully we will be able to meet in person at the next FFSS and enjoy the hospitality of the hosting institution. However, the organization of the online event was executed flawlessly by the University of Eastern Finland's staff.

